

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

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THE ENGINEER'S BOOKSHELF

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

OFTEN I have stopped to reflect just what might be the reading interests of the country at large. What are the books that are being read by Mr. Average Man? Do the interests of the man in New York state differ from those of the man living on the west coast or in the Mississippi river valley states? Why do certain sections of the country sell more copies of a certain popular novel than other sections several hundred miles away? These questions, from time to time, have come into my mind, and at long last, they are, in part at least, answered.

Several weeks ago Dr. George Gallup, director of the American Institute of Public Opinion, published the findings of a survey that he made in December 1938, a survey concerning Mr. Average Man's ideas of the most interesting books that he had read. The results are amazing, and without further introduction here they are in the order that the answers indicated when they were tabulated at Dr. Gallup's office:

1. The Bible.
2. Gone With the Wind.
3. Anthony Adverse.
4. The Citadel.
5. How to Win Friends and Influence People.
6. The Good Earth.
7. Ben-Hur.
8. Northwest Passage.
9. Little Women.
10. A Tale of Two Cities.
11. Les Miserables.
12. Magnificent Obsession.
13. Adventures of Tom Sawyer.
14. Treasure Island.
15. Count of Monte Cristo.
16. Robinson Crusoe.
17. Ivanhoe.
18. The

Green Light. 19. David Copperfield. 20. Call of the Wild.

Before we go further in this matter of interesting reading material, let us consider the manner with which the survey was made. The question that Mr. Gallup sent out from his office read this way: What is the most interesting book you ever read? Several hundred thousand were mailed to all sections of the country, and in order to gain a representative cross section of the country at large, the questions also went to people in all walks of life, from Maine to California, from Florida to the state of Washington. Therefore, from all indications, it represents a fair cross section of what books interest people.

Of course, the answers are amazing from first to last. Why, do you suppose, does the Bible rank first in the minds of so many people as the most interesting book that they have read? Did they really mean it when they answered the question in that manner? Or do you fancy that they put down the answer out of reverence to the Book? I admit that the Bible represents good, even splendid reading, but I would not say that as a whole it is the most interesting book that I have ever read. Without a doubt the King James version of the Bible contains some of the most perfect English that has ever been written, and many of our better and most popular novels are based on Biblical

themes that may be found in its various books. Certain portions of it are pure poetry, but the very fact that such poetical quality exists in the Bible does not lead me to answer that it is the most interesting book on my reading list. Do you not suppose that the reason of its choice might have been out of respect for the Bible? That, to my way of thinking, may have been the reason for the answers.

It surely is interesting to add that among the answers of those selecting the Bible as the most interesting book, 6% were under 30 years of age and 37% were over 50 years of age.

Another amazing revelation from the survey is the indication of the Hollywood influence on the reading public. Take, for example, the selection of the second book on Dr. Gallup's list, "Gone With the Wind." Mrs. Margaret Mitchell's novel, published in 1936, has been suffering casting pains in Hollywood for more than a year, and a week seldom passes that we do not read something in the newspapers about the selection of a star for the certain role. Hollywood or no Hollywood, Mrs. Mitchell's novel is splendid reading and I am glad to see that the career of Scarlett O'Hara—after all, she is a modern Becky Sharp—is so widely liked. Hollywood will have a fine time filming Sherman's March to the Sea, which incidentally makes up a thrilling section of the novel.

Then there is "Anthony Adverse" published during those hectic summer days of 1933. Mr. Allen made his story a biography and a history, covering the years of 1775 to 1825 and takes his hero across Europe to Africa and finally to America.

Also, there is the selection of A. H. Cronin's "The Citadel." Hollywood had great success with this picture and made it into one of the best productions of the year. The poverty and success, happiness and sorrow of Dr. Manson whose professional career was thwarted by fashionable medicine, not only made a moving story but also furnished material the like of which Hollywood thrives on. The picture had something to say, just as did the novel, and the studio lots allowed the silver screen to say it, too.

It is unwise to comment about each and every one of these reading selections, but let me further announce surprise at the presence of some titles on the list. Of course, I am referring to one especially, Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People." Interesting? Well, draw your own conclusions. I would say the Dickens' novels, the Victor Hugo novel, the Pearl Buck and Kenneth Roberts and the Mark Twain and the Dumas novels, justly earn a place on such a list; but, for the life of me, I cannot understand why anyone would say that the Carnegie book is the most interesting one he had ever read. I am one against many; probably I am wrong.

"The Good Earth" is the most searching novel on Dr. Gallup's list, for the reader actually lives with

Wang Lung, feels his happiness and his sorrow. It is a magnificent story of Life as it has been lived, as it is being lived today, and as it will be lived in future years to come. With Paul Muni as a lead, Hollywood did not fail to give an all-time great picture.

Who, I ask, could fail to wish to read "A Tale of Two Cities," after seeing Blanche Yurka's production? As fine a story of self-sacrifice as the world has ever known; a story of truly great love caught in the war madness of the French Revolution! And the same statement, I believe, applies to Charles Laughton's Jean Valjean. "Les Miserables" is a literary cornerstone; it is vast; it is unforgettable; it is a stunning story of Post-Napoleonic France. Had I never read the book, I certainly would have stayed up nights to do so after seeing Mr. Laughton as Valjean.

Curiously enough, are not all of these "most interesting books" stories of adventure? There is Mark Twain's "Tom Sawyer": an epic of boyhood told by a person young enough in heart to realize the humor of playing hookey and of capturing jewel-laden caravans. There is Stevenson's "Treasure Island": A gorgeous yarn of buried gold and mutiny and pirates . . . and a brave cabin boy. There is "Robinson Crusoe": The original and immortal desert island story. There is Sir Walter Scott's "Ivanhoe": Coeur-de-Leon and Robin Hood and tournaments and robber-barons. There is Jack London's "The Call of the Wild": The Klondike and dogs, and snow over barren waste. Yes, adventure, every one of them: adventure with a large, inviting A.

Now, let us look at the publication dates of these "most interesting books." Excluding the Bible, publication dates line up in this fashion: 1. Eight books were published between 1930 and 1938. 2. Eleven books were published before 1900. 3. One book was published between 1900 and 1930 (Jack London's "The Call of the Wild" was published in 1903).

Now, we ask ourselves this question: What were the popular books that were published during those thirty years between 1900 and 1930? We discover that during this time Sinclair Lewis published "Main Street"; that Will Durant published "The Story of Philosophy"; that Edna Ferber published "So Big"; that John Erskine published "The Private Life of Helen of Troy." They were all best sellers in their day and some justly enough won prizes. Why has Hollywood not put them in the movies? Why did those books not appear in Mr. Gallup's answers for the "most interesting book?" Is it for the very reason that Hollywood has not used the titles? I will let you draw your own conclusions.

Mr. Gallup's survey has been amazing and revealing, and I hope that he conducts another similar survey next year. If he does do that, I hope that he will reword his question. I hope that it will be phrased this way: What book that you have read has influenced you most greatly in life?

Idiot's Delight

Recently I was interested to see what the people on the movie lot had done to Robert E. Sherwood's play of several years back, "Idiot's Delight," and I was delighted to find that they had failed to spoil it. I recall so well, one cold March night a couple years ago, of sitting myself down at the Hartman Theatre to see Mr. Alfred Lunt dash through his lines as the hoofer Harry, and to watch the perfect work that Mrs. Lunt did as the "phony" Russian countess Irene. It was sheer pleasure to watch that famous couple toy with their lines, pointing and timing their rich material, and turning in as satisfactory performance as I have ever witnessed.

Probably with trepidation, I saw Clark Gable and Norma Shearer take the roles formerly allotted to the Lunts. Clark Gable's part was not such a difficult one for him to do; he is admirably suited to it. Miss Shearer's Irene is surely different. Irene is an extremely difficult role to play... but how she did it! It seemed to me that she has successfully aped Mrs. Lunt,

a no mean achievement in itself. There were the sleek lines, the severe bobbed hair, the ever present cigarette in one hand and the Vodka glass in the other. She was a carbon copy of Mrs. Alfred Lunt and she was a good one.

But alas, the Hollywood ending! Hollywood leads their Harry and Irene back to the London music halls; but Mr. Sherwood led his Harry and Irene to the very brink of hellish ruination, where, I believe, they should have been left. It was just another disastrous Hollywood ending to an otherwise splendid picture.

Grand Illusion

"Grand Illusion," France's contribution to American cinema-goers, has come and gone; and as far as I can learn it has left no indelible trace of appreciation. Its story of French soldiers in a German prison camp during the World War was not outstanding. Its direction under the able guidance of Jean Renoir was superb, with its resultant splendid acting. I am glad that I saw the picture, but I do not believe I would cross the street to do it again.